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ABSTRACT

PAVE (Partners Advancing Values in Education) was founded in 1992 as an independent, non-profit organization by civic and business leaders who believe that all families deserve equal educational opportunities for their children. The primary focus of PAVE is to provide low-income families in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with financial assistance so they can enroll their children in a school that meets their needs. To qualify for the program, families must meet federal poverty guidelines. At the initiation of the program, 4,094 families applied for PAVE assistance and 2,089 grants were awarded. Evaluations of the program reported high levels of parent satisfaction, student academic achievement, parent involvement, and minority enrollment. PAVE has become a transformational organization, with a goal to transform a private charitable voucher program into enlightened public policy. The PAVE program illustrates the equitableness and effectiveness of choice in education, and the benefits that can result when families become truly empowered to manage their children's education. (WJC)

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PAVING THE WAY TO GREATER PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION

by
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April 13, 1996

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Daniel M. McKinley
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

I am very pleased to be with you this morning to share with you some of the experiences of PAVE (Partners Advancing Values in Education).

My brief comments will cover the following three areas:

1. A description of PAVE - why we got started, how we got started and what we did, including results from evaluations.
2. Recent events.
3. General conclusions.

PAVE was founded in 1992 as an independent, non-profit organization by civic and business leaders who believe that all families deserve equal educational opportunities for their children. Many low-income families in Milwaukee are not well served by the schools the government system has chosen for them. The primary focus of PAVE's mission is to provide these families with financial assistance so that they can enroll their children in a school that better meets their needs. To qualify for the program, families simply must meet federal poverty guidelines. PAVE scholarships are

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equivalent to one-half tuition, and they can be used at any of 108 private or parochial schools in Milwaukee.

At the initiation of the program in the 1992-93 academic year, 4,094 families applied for PAVE assistance. We awarded a total of 2,089 grants worth a total of $1,278,932.27.

During the 1993-94 school year, the number increased to 2,370 students enrolled in 102 different schools; in the 1994/95 school year PAVE awarded 2,654 scholarships. In the current school year the number of scholarships total 4,407. A detailed "Scholarship Report" is attached.

It should be noted that another school choice program, MPCP (Milwaukee Parental Choice Program), was implemented by the state legislature in 1990 through leadership of state legislator Polly Williams. This is a government-funded tuition voucher program through which low-income students can attend any of roughly a dozen non-religious private schools in Milwaukee. In 1993/94 about 750 students participated in the MPCP program.

PAVE's board at the outset deliberated on how to arrange for a thorough and independent evaluation of the scholarship program, and ultimately decided to seek the help of Family Service America (FSA), the foremost international research organization on families. FSA was able to secure funding for this project, and conducted evaluations of the scholarship program in 1993, 1994 and 1995.

The first-year evaluation of the program reported high levels of parent satisfaction (96%) and involvement (97%) from the 960 families who completed the survey.

The second-year evaluation investigated seventh grader's academic achievement, and reported that PAVE students scored higher in reading and math than did representative samples from Milwaukee public schools.

The findings of the third-year evaluation concluded that: "The overwhelming majority of parents were satisfied with the performance of the schools:

96% with the teacher's performance
94% with the principal's performance
92% with discipline in the school
97% with the program of instruction
96% with textbooks
96% with amount child learned
97% with opportunities for parental involvement
97% with school location
92% rated the school "A" or "B"

And parents became significantly involved in the schools:

- 96% attended parent-teacher conferences: "Parents reported that they consistently participated in school activities and assisted children with school work. Schools encourage and expect parent participation, and they expect children to achieve. Parents in turn are actively involved in their children's education, and expect performance by their children, contributing to an environment in which parents and teachers become collaborators, not adversaries."

- "The percentage of African-American and Hispanic families in the scholarship program is larger than the national average. Most of the PAVE schools reflect the ethnicity of the neighborhood in which they are located; in other words, most of the PAVE schools are ethnically integrated. PAVE parents most often choose elementary schools located in their neighborhood."

- "Only 12 parents complained or expressed dissatisfaction with their school choice, but even those parents indicated they were grateful for and satisfied with the PAVE program."

Maureen Wahl, Ph.D., former Director of Research for Family Service America and author of all three annual reports on the PAVE scholarship program, noted that "the FSA data indicate that when parents choose a school for their child they enter into a partnership with the school and

become involved in the activities of the school. When parents are involved, children do better in school as well as attend better schools. "

Dr. Wahl also observed that "when researchers began investigating educational outcomes instead of process, they learned that the family had a stronger influence on achievement than did schools. Some have interpreted these findings to absolve educators from responsibility for school failures. Recent studies, however, point to a different conclusion. Educators are more effective with all children when they build strong family-school-community partnerships."

I have described PAVE's origin, what we accomplished, and an evaluation of the first three years of the scholarship program. Recently, after a year of discussion and debate, the Wisconsin legislature approved Governor Thompson's plan to extend parental choice to thousands of additional families and to allow them to select parochial schools. The expanded school choice program emulated PAVE's model, and was an immediate hit. By the time the first private and parochial schools opened the week of August 21, thousands of families had signed up for the program and hundreds of students had begun classes. The American Civil Liberties Union and the Milwaukee teachers union filed suit, alleging that allowing parochial-school choice violates the constitutional separation of church and state. On August 25 the Supreme Court of Wisconsin issued a preliminary injunction halting the new implementation of the new legislation.

The community's reaction to this sudden withdrawal of state funds reminded one of Frank Capra's <u>It's A Wonderful Life</u> movie:

Within two days of the injunction PAVE established an emergency fund to raise tuition money for children left in the lurch. At our board meeting on September 21 it was reported that cash & pledges to date for the emergency fund were $1,800,000, which was raised in donations ranging from $5 bills to checks for $20,000. The total cash and pledges to date for 1995/96 is $3,680,000 involving 476 donors. Additional anticipated pledges for 1995/96 from our donors is $110,000.

These extraordinary acts of generosity give eloquent testimony to the spirit of a community dedicated to its children and undeterred by a temporary setback. Many struggles lie ahead, including a possible fight in the U.S. Supreme Court. A legal victory is essential to the survival of school choice but moral victories are important too. The battle for the hearts and minds of the people who matter most -- the mothers and fathers and children of Milwaukee, has been won by the forces of change.

PAVE has thus become a transformational organization, in the sense that our ultimate goal is to transform a private charitable voucher program into enlightened public policy. When low-income families no longer need to rely on charity for educational opportunities, PAVE will have accomplished its mission.

And now the third and final area of my remarks: General conclusions about school choice.

From PAVE's three years of experience we can conclude the following:

1. In the words of a mother of a PAVE scholarship student, "PAVE has dispelled the myth that poor parents don't care about their children's education." Another parent said, "Too many parents at too many schools have seen their children go without homework and make no academic progress." They concluded that public schools simply could not bring themselves to demand much of their children. One parent said "The students might get (at a public school) a multicultural curriculum, or pleasant smiles, but they would not learn how to read and write. "

2. Another myth was exploded regarding parental involvement. One mother wrote that she was especially thankful for the PAVE program because it allowed her to attend parent-teacher conferences. Before the PAVE program she had 4 children in 4 different schools, all at a distance from her home. With the PAVE program, her children all attended the same private school in her neighborhood. If choice parents were largely invisible in their old public schools, they are visible everywhere in their new schools - in the corridors, in the office, even in the classrooms, where they sometimes work

as aides (to assist in their share of tuition). In fact, the choice schools work in close collaboration with parents: parents sit on the boards, and head up committees. The choice schools offer a caring community, and welcome parents and children as respected members.

3. Choice schools are doing something right - possessing features that spark higher parental satisfaction and involvement. Maintaining stricter discipline seems to be a factor. Parents also feel school principals and teachers are more accessible, compared to those in public schools.

4. Preschool and child-care programs are now largely financed through vouchers and tax credits. "When carefully targeted on families most in need, access has been widened and quality has been fairly distributed across poor and affluent communities," a recent study noted. There is no logical reason these benefits should not be extended as children enter kindergarten, often at the same school where they were enrolled as a 3-year-old with a voucher.

5. The choice program may be so popular with Milwaukee's low-income parents because it avoids busing one's children out of the community.

6. Choice transfers power, according to Charles Finn - it shifts control of resources from the producers of education to the consumers - the parents and the students. Parents then have more leverage over educational resources. Choice is essentially a shift of power, influence and control.

7. Choice is successfully utilized by teachers in the public school system - a recent study found 32.9% of Milwaukee public school teachers send their children to private schools.

In closing, let me read a letter from a PAVE parent. She captures all of what I have been presenting in the most genuine and eloquent words:

> "I just wanted to take some time to make sure you understand how much the scholarship for my son means to both of us.

Being a single parent with no financial help from Aaron's father for the past three years has been very difficult. Money is always in short supply many times we have gone without food, fallen behind on utility bills and last year we were homeless and stayed with friends. Aaron attended 3 schools in less than 18 months.

Because of your generosity my son can continue at Mt. Calvary while we continue, with God's help, to put our lives back together. I left his father because of gang affiliation by his sons from a first marriage. I didn't want Aaron raised around street gang members who had already started recruiting him at age 5.

May God bless you and your work. I pray everyday that Aaron and I will be able to help another child attend Mt. Calvary someday. "

PAVE is currently "filling the gap" between public policy advances and the anticipated eventual legal successes. The PAVE program illustrates the equitableness and effectiveness of choice in education, and all the good that can happen when families become truly empowered to manage their children's education.